

19 APRIL 1978

STAT

Carter takes stock

President Carter reasonably timed his assembly of his top advisors at Camp David over the past weekend. It was, in effect, a retreat (in the spirit-building sense) after the Carter team had spent almost a week before several hundred members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors gathered in convention a few blocks from the White House. The administration leaders could be said to be nursing their wounds at Camp David.

The disarray of executive leadership in the first 15 months of the Carter administration was apparent to most of the editors attending the convention, including those from The Oregonian. There was not much administration progress to be reported in foreign affairs or legislation recommended to Congress; and perhaps having most impact on the White House was the cool reception the editors and their spouses gave the president, who made special arrangements in his schedule to speak at a noon luncheon.

It was a major speech, calling for a drive against inflation. The subject was dear to the hearts of most editors, as their editorials have documented. But the reception of the president was not warm: The audience stood, as is traditional when a president of the United States takes his place on the platform, and rose again when he left after fielding a few questions, but there was virtually no applause between the beginning and the end.

There were some bright spots in the Carter administration's generous response to the editors' invitations to appear, speak and submit to questions. Strangely enough, considering the post-Watergate spirit of the times, the editors appeared pleased with the performance of Stansfield Turner and William H. Webster, new directors, respectively, of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They appeared to be capable, as they pledged, of sweeping out the odors of oppression generated by activities of the agencies in recent years.

But on the morning after the Carter speech at noon and the Turner-Webster appearances in the evening, the man who continues to be identified, by himself and others, as the president's "best friend" — Bert Lance, retired director of the budget — stirred the editors' adrenalin by suggesting that the press could expect government censorship if it did not treat government officials (such as he had been) more kindly.

The secret White House staff and Cabinet discussions at Camp David certainly did not include any serious considerations of the Lance threat. But they should have dwelt on some ramifications of the Carter leadership, as reflected in the Lance case. The new president has been as indecisive and as equivocal in office as he was as a candidate. As a result, the U.S. foreign

policy remains undefined, despite Carter lectures on civil rights, and domestic policy decisions languish in Congress.

Both Carter and his press secretary, Jody Powell (who rather charmed the editors with his wit), refused to enlighten questioners on what went on in the post-mortems at Camp David. "You don't particularly care to discuss all your problems in public," he said. "There is a time and place to make known specific changes. You are talking about a number of changes, some large and some small."

To correct the things that have disturbed President Carter, some of the changes may have to be large, indeed. Thus far, Carter has not been prompt in making such changes.